

Jonah 2: From Running to Repentance

Can someone be too far away that God won't hear?

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:17

His nickname was Casey (Casey Diaz), and even though in prison, he still called the shots.

Shot callers, he explains, have an elevated rank in the gang world. They are the power-brokers, who determine who gets hurt (or killed) and who doesn't. They command respect...as a teenager in South Central LA, [I lead] the Rockwood Street Locos. We invaded homes, broke into cars, ransacked convenience stores, stabbed rival gang members. The streets were bloody. Most of the time, it was kill or be killed.

Eventually, the LAPD caught up with me. Sentenced to 13 years for second-degree murder, along with 52 counts of armed robbery. At the Pitchess Detention Center, other inmates approached me about a becoming a shot-caller in the prison. When a riot went off, I made sure the right people got the shanks (knives used for stabbing another prisoner).

Transferred to Folsom State Prison, already knowing Casey's rank, the guards immediately put him in solitary confinement...an 8'x10' box with a light bulb that never went off, no TV, no radio, no books. Out only minutes for meals. Casey struggled to keep his sanity.

Still, he wasn't interested in religion, even though attending a Protestant service was an option. But alone in the belly of that prison... "lying on my bed, listening to voices outside, I heard an older woman say, 'Is there someone in that cell?' She sounded Southern and spoke with a syrupy drawl. 'Yes ma'am,' the guard said, 'but you don't want to deal with Diaz. You're wasting your time.'

'Well,' she answered, 'Jesus came for him, too.'

"Looking through the open slot in my gate, I couldn't see anything except for the guard's boots and a pair of spindly legs. 'How are you doing?' she asked. 'I couldn't be better,' came my sarcastic reply.

*'Young man,' she said, 'I'm going to pray for you. But there's something else I want to tell you: **Jesus is going to use you.**' By now, I was certain she was crazy. Couldn't she see I was locked away in solitary confinement? 'I don't think that's going to happen,' I said. But she persisted. 'Young man, ever time I'm in here, I'm going to come by and remind you that Jesus is going to use you.'*

"A year or so later, I was laying down in my cell, daydreaming, when I turned toward the wall opposite my bed. On that wall, something strange was happening. A movie was playing, a movie about my life. I saw myself as a child, walking the old neighborhood at 9th and Kenmore. I witnessed incidents from my early days with the gang—everything in picture perfect detail.

"Then, I saw a bearded man with long hair carrying a cross. As he trudged along, a mob of angry people shouted at him. When he arrived at the top of the knoll, rough-looking men nailed his hands and feet to the wooden beams and raised the cross so that it stood between two other men on crosses.

"What got to me most was when this man looked at me and said, 'Darwin, I'm doing this for you.' I shuddered. Apart from the guards and my family, no one knew my real name. Everyone called me Casey—my nickname for as long as I could remember.

"Then, I heard the sound of breath leaving him. At that moment, I knew he had died.

“That’s when I hit the floor in the middle of the cell. I started weeping because I knew, somehow, this was Almighty God, even though I didn’t understand what he had done for me. I knew I had to get on my knees. I started confessing my sins: ‘God, I’m sorry for stabbing so many people. God, I’m sorry I robbed so many families.’

“With each new confession, I felt another weight come off my shoulders. When I finished, I knew something major had happened.”ⁱ

What’s your favorite “repentance” story? Perhaps David’s confession of his sin with Bathsheba when confronted by Nathan? It might be the prodigal son (or would you call it the Persistently Loving Father?). Maybe your eyes widen when you think about how Jesus turned Saul into Paul (Acts 9, and following).

REPENTANCE (a turning to the opposite direction) is incredibly compelling when God brings it about in someone’s life. A major hinge changing things forever. Has repentance ever happened in your life? When? How? To what end?

In our first two weeks of peering into Jonah’s account, we’ve watched as a prophet of God’s heart was not aligned with the heart of God. Out of that non-alignment came foolish disobedience which invited God’s discipline. Jonah actually ran into

- the power of God’s direct command in Jonah’s life,
- the power of God thrashing Jonah’s circumstances,
- the power of God pinpointing Jonah’s guilt, and
- the power of Jonah realizing dying to self was the only way anyone around him would be saved

And now...a rebellious Jonah is in solitary confinement, in the belly of a great fish.

Life is difficult when your heart is not aligned with God’s heart. It becomes even more difficult when you try to run away from a powerfully sovereign God whose heart beats for saving a world of lost people. So there Jonah is, in solitary confinement...and the question is ***What needs to replace rebellion?***

When swallowed by the consequences of disobedience, let the repentance of humble worship replace rebellion

Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

³ For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me; all your waves
and your billows passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight;
yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head

⁶ at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.

⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

From the confining slime of hours in a whale's belly, the movie playing before Jonah's eyes is what God has justly done to his life, and how urgently his rebellion must be replaced by the worship of humble repentance. So what does Jonah's prayer teach us about humble repentance?

1. The repentance of humble worship discovers God's responsiveness 2:2

"I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice."

Interestingly, Jonah's prayer is actually Scripture with which he is very familiar; perhaps Scripture he'd memorized years before. From Psalm 18:4-6, Jonah cries out David's desperate song as he seeks to elude the grasp of a disturbed King Saul. If God could hear David from the depths of a stone cave, Jonah discovered God could hear him from 'the belly of Sheol' (i.e., the place where the dead dwell).

Martin Luther observedⁱⁱ that "Jonah did not actually utter these very words with his mouth, nor arrange them in this orderly manner...[Jonah] is recalling what his state of mind was, what thoughts he had when he was engaged in this conflict of death..."

Praying in the chaos of storm and sea, sinking deep below the surface, to the God from whom he had been running. God can hear anyone's repentant words, anyone's repentant thoughts from anywhere, from the lowest place imaginable.

What a tremendous idea! No one can be too far from God for God to hear a genuine, humble

cry. It is the character of God to respond to “Help!”

2. The repentance of humble worship recognizes God’s sovereignty, with hope 2:3-4

^{2:3} For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves
and Your billows passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away from Your sight;
yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’

There are two very remarkable features about Jonah’s words here. The first is Jonah’s acknowledgement that God has been very personally active in what has happened to Jonah. The fact that he was in the heart of the seas in the belly of a whale was not merely the out come of a run of bad luck. No, Jonah’s humble worship recognizes that God IS the One who has actively backed up the truck and dumped the whole load. “You cast me...Your waves...Your billows have completely washed me away.

The second? Jonah doesn’t blame God as if He wasn’t justified, or being unfair, in doing what He’s done to Jonah. “I didn’t just run;” Jonah admits, “You drove me away because of my sinfulness.” In worship, **a repentant heart owns its sinfulness**. Casey Diaz was on his knees on the concrete, confessing his sin. The prodigal’s first words were, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Luke 15:18). 120 years ago, Oswald Chambersⁱⁱⁱ put it like this:

Whenever God touches sin, it is independence that is touched, and that awakens resentment in the human heart. [But] Independence must be blasted clean out, there must be no such thing left; only freedom, which is very different. Freedom is the ability not to insist on my rights, but to see that God gets His.^{iv}

Irish pastor Charles Wolfe^v:

Those who would avoid the despair of sinfulness by staying far from God find they have also missed the forgiving grace of God.

Keller: “Jonah knew that there was divine justice”^{vi} in his situation, and that he deserved all that God had done to him...and yet he prayed in HOPE (vs.4) – “yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.”

You see, here’s the truth about God. He hates sin. He hates when sin convinces us we can be foolishly independent of God. He will let us experience the awful consequences of sin and even

churn up our lives to the point of despair...but it all has a purpose. The purpose is to offer us His grace and forgiveness and life and joy **if we will repent**. Jonah's experience shouts hope!

When swallowed by the consequences of disobedience, let the repentance of humble worship replace rebellion

Repentance which recognizes God's sovereignty also discovers God's responsiveness.

3. The repentance of humble worship experiences the Lord's deliverance 2:5-7

^{2:5} The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.
⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple

A close look at this part of Jonah's prayer reveals something stunning. Jonah may well be telling us that he died in the sea. He sank *way down* ("the deep surrounded me;" "at the root of the mountains;" "down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever"). Some scholars who analyze the language understand this to be a description of death; and thus God allowed his servant to die and then brought him back to life through the agency of the whale.^{vii}

The point? Life from God is the fruit of humble repentance.

yet You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.
When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord

4. the repentance of humble worship declares how important true worship is 2:8-9

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.
⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay. **Salvation belongs to the Lord!**"

Listen to Jonah here! Every person's choice determines each person's relationship with God. You can choose to worship other "idols," other gods (if you will)...and in so doing, you forsake the hope you could have of God's salvation and steadfast love. Or, "with the voice of thanksgiving, in the worship of humble repentance" any one can say, "Here's what I've discovered

- God’s responsiveness to my cry (Salvation belongs to the Lord)
- God’s sovereignty in and over my circumstances (“ ”)
- God’s deliverance of giving me life (Salvation belongs to the Lord)

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The Lord’s ears, the Lord’s hands, the Lord’s salvation are wide open to repentant worship.

THE BOTTOM LINE
The crucial importance of repentance

Tony Evans, author of KINGDOM MAN, explains the worship of repentance like this:

A MAN one day was on his way to catch a train. He had to get to work because he had an important meeting. He had to catch the 8:05 train.

Now, it had rained the night before and the man was rushing out the door. As he opened the back door, there was his little son playing in the mud. He was busy rubbing mud on his face, mud on his arms, and just having a good old time playing in the mud. The father, intent on catching the 8:05, jumped over his son, said good-bye, and rushed out of the house to catch the 8:05, but he slipped and fell in the mud next to his son. So now the father is in the mud and the son is in the mud.

But, the father had to catch the 8:05. He had a place to go. Because of where he needed to go, he did not stay in the mud and play with his son. His son was enjoying playing in the mud and wasn’t trying to go anywhere. But the father had a train to catch. He jumped up out of the mud. Best as he could, he cleaned himself off and took off running because he had a train to catch. He had to catch the 8:05 and he knew that on the 8:05 there was going to be a washroom where he could clean up the dirt that he had accumulated during the time he was in the mud.

There are two kinds of people today. There are some who are playing in the mud and are not trying to go anywhere. There are other people who are in the mud but don’t want to be. Maybe you’ve slipped in the mud or maybe you’ve walked right into the mud, but now it has dawned on you that you’ve got a train to catch—a place to go. You’ve got a God to know, a life to live, experiences to have, and you want all that God has for you.

Maybe you’ve decided to leave the mud, to repent, to turn, and to catch the train because on this train, God has got a washroom that will clean you up. He’s got the blood of Jesus Christ that will transform you and take you to the destination of God’s purpose for your life.

Sin always has consequences. But the good news is that grace is greater than sin.^{viii}

What kind of person are you today? Are you “in the mud and not trying to go anywhere”?

You’re not particularly interested in being serious about a relationship with God, of turning your life over to him, of experiencing His unique life and salvation. You’re simply content in the mud.

You may say, “I don’t like your illustration; I am offended by you characterizing what’s going on

in my life as *playing in the mud.*" I can understand that. God's claim on your life is challenging your independence from him, which is sin...and you have yet to humble yourself before God and say, "What I really need is Your salvation and the resurrection life only you can give." Call your life what you want – Jonah 2:8 describes it as *paying regard to vain idols.*"

But God never created you, nor does He offer you His life and salvation, for you to simply be content in the mud. There's a Lord God to know. His son's blood shed for you on the cross can clean you up. There's a real life to live, a life of all that God has for you now, and in eternity.

It can happen from the belly of a whale, from an 8X10 cell in a prison, in the chair at a worship center, or you sitting behind wheel of your car in a quiet spot.

For the Lord God to change your forever...let the repentance of humble worship replace your stubborn rebellion. Repent. Step out of the mud...and into true life on God's shore.

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ⁱ Casey Diaz, "When Jesus Calls a Gang Leader By Name: How a mysterious prison movie drove me to my knees," *Christianity Today*, May 2019, pp.79-80. Dias is the author of *The Shot Caller: A Latino Gangbanger's Miraculous Escape from a Life of Violence to a New Life in Christ* (Thomas Nelson). He lives in LA where he runs a sign-making business and serves as a part-time pastor.

ⁱⁱ Cited in C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes – Volume X Minor Prophets*, "Jonah," (Eerdmans, 1977, 399).

ⁱⁱⁱ **Oswald Chambers** (24 July 1874 – 15 November 1917) was an early twentieth-century Scottish [Baptist](#) and [Holiness Movement](#) evangelist and teacher, best known for the devotional [My Utmost for His Highest](#). In 1915, a year after the outbreak of [World War I](#), Chambers suspended the operation of the school and was accepted as a [YMCA](#) chaplain. He was assigned to [Zeitoun, Cairo, Egypt](#), where he ministered to [Australian and New Zealand troops](#), who later participated in the [Battle of Gallipoli](#). Chambers raised the spiritual tone of a center intended by both the military and the YMCA to be simply an institution of social service providing wholesome alternatives to the brothels of Cairo. When he told a group of fellow YMCA workers that he had decided to abandon concerts and movies for Bible classes, they predicted the exodus of soldiers from his facilities. "What the skeptics had not considered was Chamber's unusual personal appeal, his gift in speaking, and his genuine concern for the men." Soon his wooden-framed "hut" was packed with hundreds of soldiers listening attentively to messages such as "What Is the Good of Prayer?" Confronted by a soldier who said, "I can't stand religious people," Chambers replied, "Neither can I." Chambers irritated his YMCA superiors by giving away refreshments that the organization believed should be sold so as not to raise expectations elsewhere. Chambers installed a contribution box but refused to ask soldiers to pay for tea and cakes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Chambers

^{iv} Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes & Idea Starters for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Baker Books), 157.

^v Irish Pastor, (1791-1823) Author of *The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna*

NOT a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corpse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

We buried him darkly at dead of night,
The sods with our bayonets turning;
By the struggling moonbeam's misty light
And the lantern dimly burning.

No useless coffin enclosed his breast,
Not in sheet nor in shroud we wound him;
But he lay like a warrior taking his rest
With his martial cloak around him.

Few and short were the prayers we said
And we spoke not a word of sorrow,
But we steadfastly gazed on the face of the dead,
And we bitterly thought of the morrow.

We thought, as we hollowed his narrow bed,
And smoothed down his lonely pillow,
That the foe and the stranger would tread o'er his head,

And we far away on the billow!

Lightly they'll talk of the spirit that's gone,
And o'er his cold ashes upbraid him;
But little he'll reck, if they let him sleep on
In the grave where a Briton has laid him.

But half of our heavy task was done,
When the clock tolled the hour for retiring:
And we heard the distant random gun
That the foe was sullenly firing.

Slowly and sadly we laid him down,
From the field of his fame fresh and gory;
We carved not a line, we raised not a stone,—
But we left him alone with his glory.

^{vi} Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, p.74.

^{vii} The Old and New Testaments give record to at least 8 other resurrections from the dead. (1) Elijah raising the widow's son 1 Ki.17:7f, (2) Elisha raising the Shunamite's son 2 Ki 4:18f., (3) man raised out of Elisha's grave 2 Ki 13:20f, (4) Jesus raising the widow of Nain's son Luke 7:11, (5) Jesus raising Jarius' daughter, Luke 8:52, (6) Jesus raising Lazarus John 11:52, (7) Peter raising Tabitha Acts 9:36, (8) Paul raising Eutychus Acts 20:7-12. We might also include Paul being raised from stoning death (Acts 14:19), Jesus' being raised, as well as other saints after His resurrection (Matthew 27:50. Jonah's resurrection would make the number 12.

^{viii} Evans, Tony. *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30 Years of Preaching and Public Speaking* (p. 218). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Evans, Tony. *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30*